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Spring 2017

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Recommended Citation

Shriberg, David L.; Brooks, Keeshawna; Jenkins, Kisha; Immen, Jennifer; Sutter, Caroline; and Cronin, Karen. Using Student Voice to Respond to Middle School Bullying: A Student Leadership Approach. *School Psychology Forum*, 11, 1: 20-33, 2017. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, School of Education: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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ABSTRACT: Bullying prevention and intervention are ongoing challenges for all educators, school psychologists included. A lack of research exists regarding the potential role of middle school students as direct actors in bullying prevention and intervention. This article describes a novel student leadership group for seventh graders in which the primary leadership task was the creation of bullying prevention ideas for their school. The details of this group are described, as are the results of postgroup student interviews. Results indicate that the students found the group to be valuable. However, the broader collaborative effort between educators at this school and the university researchers to maintain a comprehensive bullying prevention system did not survive the school's reorganization. This article addresses the lessons learned and the potential implication of this project for school psychology practice.

Over the past 2 decades, the bullying prevention and intervention literature has grown considerably (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Both the short-term and cumulative impact of bullying is troubling. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) reports that involvement with bullying is associated with a higher risk for suicide-related behavior.

Although there is no doubt of the need and desire to reduce or even eliminate bullying, the outcome research is still emerging and significant research to practice gaps remain (Swearer et al., 2010). In particular, there is a lack of research related to ways in which students can play a direct role in preventing and responding to bullying (Cross, Lester, Barnes, Cardoso, & Hadwen, 2015). This project sought to address this gap via the use of a novel student leadership group aimed at giving students a stronger platform to influence their school's antibullying procedures. A detailed overview of this group is provided, as well as a qualitative analysis of postgroup student interviews. The article closes with an extended discussion on lessons learned as relates to school psychology practice.

BULLYING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

While bullying is a major challenge at all levels, the frequency of bullying appears to peak in middle school (Swearer et al., 2010). Data from the National Center of Educational Statistics (2015) covering children ages 12–18 find that the frequency of bullying at school is highest in grades 6 (27.8%) and 7 (26.4%). A study of the drawings of middle school students conducted by Biag (2014) supports the common finding (e.g., Vaillancourt et al., 2010) that the spaces that students identify where they feel the least safe are the locations within the school walls where there is the least structure and adult supervision (e.g., lunch room, outdoor areas, bathroom). Comparing the results of student focus groups across multiple age groups (elementary, middle, high school), research findings indicate that elementary school children were more likely to go to adults and to see adults as sources of support when bullying occurred (Guerra, Williamson, & Sadek, 2012). Additionally, across the three cohorts middle and high school students described a wider range of persons—particularly popular girls—as more vulnerable to bullying. High school children were more likely to describe bullying as being related to boredom, dramatic value (for bystanders), and as a result of kids feeling insecure about themselves and/or trying to get the attention of others. Among these researchers' primary recommendations based on these student focus groups was the importance of bringing bullying and its causes out in the open with middle and high school students through dialogue and problem solving.

STUDENT LEADERSHIP

The vast majority of the leadership literature focuses on adults, not children or teens (MacNeil, 2006). Adulthood has been suggested as a potential explanation for this phenomenon (MacNeil, 2006). Adulthood is defined as

[t]he systematic subordination of younger people, as a targeted group, who have relatively little opportunity to exercise social power in the United States through restricted access to the goods, services, and privileges of society and are denied access to participation in the economic and political life of the society. (DeJong & Love, 2014, p. 536)

In the context of leadership development, by viewing adolescence as a period to be endured rather than a period of potential growth, many leadership approaches short change adolescence as a time to develop key leadership abilities (MacNeil, 2006). One consequence of such a mindset is that whereas most adult leadership models emphasize both thought and action, youth leadership models often only focus on learning about leadership, without the opportunity to actualize their ideas. In the case of schools, creating a mechanism for students to actualize their ideas would mean putting structures in place for youth voice to make an impact. As MacNeil (2006) writes, “For youth to develop and practice leadership, adults will have to share power” (p. 34).

What might leadership look like from a youth perspective? In one of the few studies to examine this question, photovoice was utilized to ascertain the perspective of 130 youth ages 12–19 who had completed a yearlong leadership development program (Mortensen et al., 2014). Participants were asked to take photos and record their reflections in response to the following two questions: (a) What does leadership look like? (b) What makes someone a leader? The youth in this study collectively had the view that anyone can become a leader and that leadership involves creating change, collective action, modeling and mentoring, and a strong character.

One potential application of student leadership training efforts involves empowering bystanders. A *bystander* is defined as an individual who lacks participation in bullying scenarios as either the bully or victim (Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004). Combining the findings of several studies, it is estimated that more than 80% of bullying involving children is witnessed by bystanders (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001).

A meta-analysis of 53 studies focused on school-based interventions that emphasized changing the bystander's intervention behavior found significant positive effects on bystander involvement (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012).

Although the vast majority of child bystanders report both that they find bullying to be unpleasant and want to do something to support the victim, the majority of bystanders (estimates range from 54 to 83%) do not intervene (Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012). This can have negative consequences both for the victim and the bystander. For example, a study of 2,002 adolescents ages 12–16 in the United Kingdom found that being a bystander to bullying was associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Rivers, Potteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009).

Given the paucity of research on youth leadership, it is perhaps not that surprising that there are few studies that directly link leadership training and empowering bystanders to bullying. A notable exception is a 3-year randomized study in which tenth-grade students were identified as “cyber leaders” and then trained and given a platform to influence school decisions related to cyberbullying (Cross et al., 2015). Through a mixed methods approach, in gathering data from these leaders at the end of their experience, the researchers found that “cyber leaders reported high self-efficacy posttraining, felt their intervention efforts made a difference, and experienced a sense of agency, belonging and competence when given opportunities for authentic leadership” (Cross et al., 2015, p. 35).

ACTION RESEARCH AS A FRAMEWORK TO ADDRESS BULLYING

One of the challenges noted by Swearer et al. (2010) regarding bullying prevention and intervention is a lack of research connected to an overarching theoretical framework. Given that children in schools have direct knowledge of bullying and, as such, likely have key roles to play in bullying prevention if provided a platform and support, frameworks that actively involve student input may be particularly promising. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a particularly well-matched framework for bullying prevention. The philosophical underpinning of PAR is that research is done *in collaboration with* people rather than *done to* people by the researchers (Stringer, 2013). In fostering active participation of stakeholders in the research process, PAR strives to facilitate ownership of interventions across all stakeholder groups. The idea is that this kind of involvement will produce a commitment to culturally relevant and effective change that will be sustained after the completion of the project (Song, Anderson, & Kuvinka, 2014).

Although nonprescriptive, there are four action steps characteristic of the PAR approach (Stringer, 2013). The first step is planning a research process. At this stage, the primary goal is relationship building and laying the groundwork for effective collaboration. The second step is building a picture. At this stage, the research team devises a methodology for gathering pertinent data that have the potential to advance the designated structure toward the shared goals and vision. In the third step, interpreting and analyzing, qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed utilizing an iterative process whereby tentative conclusions are shared with stakeholders. These conclusions are then revised based on feedback from all parties. The fourth stage is resolving problems and implementing sustainable solutions. Depending on the outcome of this implementation, the group may revisit one or more stages.

As will be described, the central goal of this project was facilitating a forum to develop student leaders toward advancing bullying prevention strategies in their school. PAR was the organizing theoretical framework for this project. There are few examples of student leadership groups that reflect action research principles. One promising example is a guide for running groups with youth using the EIPARS approach (Morrison, Lombado, Biscope, & Skinner, 2004). The approach is divided into four phases: (a) Where are we going? (b) How do we get there? (c) How do we know when we have arrived? (d) Where do we go next? Each letter in EIPARS describes a distinct group stage that goes in sequence and maps onto one of these four phases. *E* stands for “engage.” In the engage stage, students are recruited and encouraged to work together on a broad topic of shared interest. The *I* stands for “identify.” In this stage,

group members identify primary areas of focus (within their broader topic) that are important to them and that they would like to address. The *P* stands for “plan.” In this stage, the group agrees upon steps to address their primary area of focus. The *A* stands for “act.” In this stage, the group implements their plan. The *R* stands for “reflect/research and reward.” In this stage, the group analyzes whether its plan was successful. Finally, the *S* stands for “sustain.” In this stage, the group decides if and how its work will be maintained over time. These researchers applied this approach to successful teen groups focused on smoking cessation.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This article describes an antibullying group with seventh-grade students that used the EIPARS model. This group was conducted at Western Middle School (WMS)—this is a fictitious name—over a 10-week period. To contextualize the project, we first describe the events and plans that preceded the group. We then provide a detailed overview of the structure and content of this group, followed by the results of postgroup student interviews. Finally, we provide lessons learned and recommendations for school psychology practice based on our experiences.

History of Antibullying Efforts at the Participating School

WMS is located in the suburbs of a major U.S. city. During the year in which this study took place (2013–2014), this school housed seventh and eighth graders. According to state report card data, during the year in which this study took place there were 452 students enrolled in WMS. During this year, the student racial/ethnic breakdown was 85.4% African American, 5.8% Hispanic, 5.3% biracial, and 3.1% White. Additionally, 92.0% of students met state criteria for low income.

This project to be described in this article was developed, implemented, and analyzed as an outgrowth of a WMS/university partnership that had been in place for more than 2 years. This partnership was focused on preventing bullying utilizing a PAR framework. The needs assessment phase of this project is described in detail in a previous article (Shriberg, Burns, Desai, Grunewald, & Pitt, 2015). As a brief overview, prior to the project described in this article, there had been a multiyear partnership involving school administrators, social workers, and the school psychologist at WMS with a team from a nearby school psychology graduate program. Over the course of 2 years, this group worked collaboratively to gather qualitative and quantitative data from educators and students regarding the school’s antibullying efforts. Based on the data obtained, this team also worked to develop and implement a more streamlined approach for tracking and responding to bullying, including revising school policies.

As part of this process, it became evident through both formal data collection and more informal comments from the school-based team that students were very knowledgeable about what was happening in their school regarding bullying and had many valuable suggestions to offer. What was missing was a structural mechanism for students to provide this feedback, particularly bystanders who did not want to see bullying at their school but did not know how best to get involved in preventing bullying. As such, a student leadership group was created where the primary leadership task was to develop ideas for ways that their school can prevent and respond to bullying.

Overview of Student Leadership Group

Based on the desire to provide a stronger platform for WMS students to influence their school’s antibullying efforts, a 10-session student leadership group was created. The social workers and school psychologist at WMS e-mailed teachers seeking student nominations. Specifically, teachers were asked to nominate seventh-grade students who met the following criteria: (a) the student was not believed to be a bully and/or a victim of bullying, (b) the student demonstrated leadership skill and/or leadership potential, and (c) the teacher believed that the student would enjoy participating in this group. These

criteria were established for a few reasons. First, there was a strong sentiment, based both on the previous qualitative data from teachers and students and from our knowledge of bullying prevention research, on the value in empowering bystanders to bullying (Weins & Dempsey, 2009). The school's antibullying slogan was "Be a buddy, not a bully," and students reported that they were often not sure how best to respond to bullying situations that do not involve them. Also, the project team expressed concerns about unintentionally putting kids who have been bullied and the person doing the bullying in the same group. The goal of the group was not to resolve specific peer conflicts and utilizing students in this manner might lead to higher levels of bullying (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011). Several months before the start of this group, the school had invested in restorative justice training for many of the students' teachers. The broader school plan called for instances of bullying to be addressed primarily by teachers and administrators. Thus, the scope of the student group was to empower bystanders to think through and generate suggestions for addressing bullying.

The teachers ultimately nominated 10 students (5 girls and 5 boys). Six of these students were African American, two were Caucasian (they are twins), one student was Latino, and one student was of Asian descent. These 10 students then participated in a pre-group individual interview with two university research team members in which the goals of the group were described and the students were asked if they were interested in participating. All students provided verbal assent that they were interested in participating, at which point they were given informed consent documents to bring home to their parents/guardians in which the goals and time commitment for the group were explained. All students returned signed consent documents. Ultimately, one student dropped out of the group after a few sessions—this student had rarely spoken and did not seem particularly engaged in the group—and the remaining nine students stayed in the group for the duration.

Group Structure

The student leadership group met 10 times at a rate of once every 2 weeks. All meetings took place in an empty classroom during a nonacademic period. Each meeting lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Action research (Stringer, 2013), more generally, and the EIPARS framework (Morrison et al., 2004), more specifically, provided the philosophical and organizational structure for this group. The student leadership group included the following distinct phases (corresponding EIPARS stage in parenthesis). The first group meeting consisted primarily of introductions, ice breakers, explaining the rationale and goals for the group, and collaboratively developing group ground rules (engage). The second and third sessions focused on leadership development, with activities that focused on self-awareness of leadership strengths and team-building exercises (engage and identify). The fourth through the seventh sessions focused on bullying prevention. During this period, there were educational sessions on how bullying is defined and common strategies for addressing bullying, as well as content related to problem solving and systems change principles. The group then worked on setting goals and gathering data specific to bullying prevention at their school (identify and plan). The eighth and ninth sessions focused on implementing and beginning to evaluate the impact of the strategies they developed (act). The last session, the tenth, was both an end-of-group party and a summative discussion of what the group had accomplished and plans for the following year (reflect/research and reward and sustain).

Group Outcomes

The primary outcome of the student antibullying leadership group was the development of student-initiated ideas to address bullying in their school. These ideas included the creation of student directed videos comprising antibullying skits with a postvideo discussion component, determining ways of having teachers and administrators employ more consistent and fair disciplinary practices in relation to bullying, and interviewing teachers to glean their perspectives on the pervasiveness of bullying.

Other ideas included having a dialogue with school administration regarding bullying issues, promoting student attendance at school board meetings to raise awareness among teachers and the community about bullying, intercom announcements with messages about bullying, presentations to younger kids

with an antibullying message, peer mediation groups, an online anonymous forum to provide a venue for students to discuss bullying issues, the development of a PEACE committee (Promoting Excellence in a Calm Environment), and the incorporation of positive feedback activities such as providing a peer with a compliment and placing Post-it notes on a peer's locker with a positive message. Each of these ideas was framed around the notion of cultivating empathy and systematically changing the culture of the school.

Student-Teacher Interviews

In an effort to implement some of the ideas developed by the leadership group, during the identify and plan stages of the group the students chose to interview two teachers independently and report findings from their interviews back to the group. Based on the student report, several themes emerged from these interviews. One theme was that teachers identified bullying as a major issue at the school. Teachers believed that an effective way of handling this issue was through open dialogue between students and teachers. In addition, teachers felt that the school social workers as well as parents should be involved in efforts to address bullying. Overall, the teachers interviewed believed that different approaches to combating bullying should be utilized than what was presently in place and teachers and administrators should adhere to the establishment of a protocol outlining how disciplinary issues relative to bullying should be handled.

Student-Teacher Meeting

To further implement the ideas established by the leadership group to address bullying, during the act phase the group met with select teachers to present their ideas about how the issue of bullying should be handled in the school. The following outline guided this meeting:

- **Communication plan:** Students proposed the development of an online, anonymous forum in which students could report and discuss instances of bullying.
- **Teacher consistency:** Students suggested implementing a teacher mentoring program in which teachers would mentor students. Students also suggested the development of classroom activities or programs such as restorative justice to help counteract instances of bullying, as well as the establishment of more proactive and effective alternative disciplinary actions instead of punishments such as in-school suspensions, which the students deemed ineffective.
- **Strategies:** Students proposed the establishment of the “We’re here, we’re peers” mentoring group. Additionally, students suggested that the antibullying leadership group continue and students speak with younger students about bullying and offer their own personal experiences. Students also communicated interest in helping to plan both the school’s annual Peace Summit, and also a day of complimenting peers, such as by writing positive comments on Post-it notes.

In reaction to the students’ proposals, teachers expressed concern that having an online venue for discussion of instances of bullying could exacerbate bullying as the names of students being bullied, or those who were bullying could be included in Web posts. Consequently, teachers expressed the need for a teacher to monitor or moderate the online interface. Teachers also questioned what could be done at school when so many altercations are due to social media.

Teachers also noted that issues of consistency in employing disciplinary practices might be affected by a lack of knowledge on the part of teachers on what is transpiring outside of the classroom. Therefore, teachers suggested that unsupervised areas of the school such as the student locker room have a locker room assistant to provide better monitoring. Teachers also suggested that strategies should be provided from teachers who effectively address bullying in the classroom and shared with other teachers. In addition, teachers were supportive of specific strategies such as the positive Post-it note idea. Additional concerns noted by teachers were the pervasiveness of bullying among girls, and the difficulty of addressing cyberbullying in the school.

Postgroup Interviews

One university research team member who helped with student leadership meeting content development but was not involved in the facilitation of the biweekly meetings with students conducted postgroup student interviews in the week following the group's conclusion. Given that this research team member had no prior contact with these students, it was believed that students would be more forthcoming with their evaluations, experiences within the group, and their perspectives about the group. The interview questions were designed to capture perspectives on the group's effectiveness, the progress made toward group goals, and suggestions for running the next group. The duration of each interview was between 5 and 8 minutes. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The team then coded the transcriptions using an inductive, emergent approach. This process allowed the research team to identify patterns in the data, "organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information" (Creswell, 2014, p. 186) as each coder identified and documented the main themes per interview question. During the first round of coding, two interraters coded two to three interviews individually. During the second round the coders used deductive coding whereby the coder pairs reviewed the data that supported each theme and established consensus and entered the agreed upon theme, or code, into codebook. The final stage of the analysis included an audit of the interviews and codes by an independent reviewer to further establish reliability and consistency. The auditor did not have any suggestions for improvement. The full interview protocol is provided in the Appendix.

Main Findings

The nine students were first asked to describe their experience in this group. Unanimously, the students reported having a positive group experience. The students reported that the experience increased their awareness about bullying and helped them to have positive interactions with their peers. In a representative comment, student 9 stated, "This group was a good experience. It helped us give a vocal opinion on how we thought bullying affected children in the school and how it needs to be stopped." Student 4 noted, "This group told me a lot about how to stop and help those who are already bullied and make sure you don't become a bully yourself."

Students were next queried about their development as a leader. All students seemed to feel that the goal of personal leadership development had been realized as they saw growth within their own abilities and the capacity for leadership in their peers. Student 7 reflected on a respectful group dynamic and a spirit of cooperation among group members:

Everybody in the group was a leader or had a positive influence on people ... the goal was met because everybody took the lead when they had something to say or we all had ideas and when we worked in groups somebody took the lead and that that leader showed good leadership traits and we all listened to what we had to say.

The next question related to students' ability to define bullying. Again, the overwhelming sentiment was that this goal had been met. In a representative comment, student 8 said, "Yes, I definitely feel that this goal was met. When we were in our group we would define bullying, we were telling each other where we see it the most and how we could fix those problems."

The fourth question centered on whether the group goal of being empowered to make a difference in their school in response to bullying was achieved. For the most part, students felt that the empowerment goal had been met. However, some students believed that the effect was nominal in that the group itself felt empowered. This did not translate to the rest of the school. In a representative comment student 6 noted, "... within the group I think so because we were all willing to end bullying, but the rest of the school, I feel they're trapped because they can't do anything." Other students were more optimistic, as reflected in the comments of student 4:

I feel that this goal was met....When we first got into the group a lot of people felt uncomfortable like because we didn't know a lot about each other about the people in the group, but now as we feel empowered we have, as our leadership has grown, and we know more about bullying, the difference we can make.

Additionally, some students felt teacher involvement and support was helpful in fostering a feeling of empowerment. Student 3 noted:

I don't think as a school this goal was met but for our group, again, we already made a small difference by talking to three teachers and by doing that I noticed that the teachers were getting feedback and they were giving ideas in addition to the ideas that we had and that helped out a lot and that could make a difference.

The fifth question asked about aspects of the leadership group that the students felt was most effective. Responses from students seemed to indicate that the content and structure of the group was an effective aspect, as noted in a representative comment from student 9: "... how to combat bullying and how to resolve the anger and the hate that bullying causes, that I feel like when we touch bases on that I feel that that was very effective in the ways of how to solve bullying." Teacher involvement, specifically the student-teacher meeting, was viewed as especially effective, as noted by student 8:

I think the most effective part that we've done was ...when we interviewed all of the three teachers that we chose because that made us see how it is from their point of view. So knowing how they know what we want to do, it's good knowing what they think about our ideas to stop the bullying.

Students were also asked about components of the group that were *least* effective. Some students believed that there was no least effective part of the leadership group. For example, student 8 noted, "I don't think there was anything that was least effective. Everything at every meeting that we talked about was really effective and it covered everything we needed to know." However, other students felt that specific activities and the initial start of the group was least effective. As noted by student 3:

The least effective part of this group was actually the very beginning because I think it was our third meeting that we had and we hadn't planned anything yet so what they had us do is take pictures and put together and the objective of that was to be able to problem solve and everything but that was just to find out if we could do it ... not really about bullying or anything so I thought that was the least effective thing that this group did to stop bullying.

Students were next asked whether they felt the group should be continued the following school year. There was overwhelming support for the program's continuance. Student 1 commented, "I think that we should, the group should be run again next year so that the new people that are coming into the group they will have more ideas and more ways to prevent bullying from happening." Student 6 noted, "I feel like it should be run again next year, because next year we'll be fourth through eighth grade so we can help by telling the kids not to bully." The notion of mentorship seemed to emerge from students' responses, as reflected by student 3:

Yes, I think it should be run next year because now that the schools are splitting and having fourth graders through eighth graders that there might be a lot more bullying and honestly the students might need us. And the idea is that we create it this year and it could really bring us far next year when we start again because we could enforce it and do those ideas instead of just talking about it instead of just waiting until we meet again we can actually just make it an action.

The final question asked the students to provide any advice to adults at their school or programmatic advice for the leadership group should it continue the following year. In addition to the suggestion of opening the leadership program to other students, most students advised adults to be more cognizant of what was transpiring inside and outside of the classroom. Student 5 said, “My advice would be just try and notice what’s going on in the classroom while you guys are not doing anything like other classes just having free time and notice what’s going on around and notice if anything is going on that you feel is uneasy try to stop it.” Reflectively, student 7 offered:

Mostly, I would just say ... listen to what the kids have to say. Don’t dismiss them especially when they are trying to do the right thing and tell you what is going on instead of handling it themselves. Don’t dismiss them or try to punish them ... just try to listen.

Seemingly there was an overall message reflecting the need for more of a concerted effort among adults to address bullying. Students articulated the need for consistency in disciplinary practices, the need for open communication between students and adults (teachers and administrators), and the need for teachers and administrators to make the issue of bullying more of a priority.

OUTCOMES AND LESSONS LEARNED

While perhaps nearly every school is working on bullying prevention to a certain degree, few schools, if any, can credibly claim to have eliminated bullying. As such, there is a plethora of bullying prevention options available to practitioners, each with varying degrees of feasibility and research support and with the understanding that bullying prevention is not a one-size-fits-all proposition (Swearer & Hymel, 2015). Whereas adults certainly have a key role to play in bullying prevention efforts, the premise of this article is that it is critical to provide students with a platform to develop and share their ideas with school personnel.

Was this effort successful? In some ways yes, and in some ways no. As the student interview feedback highlighted, within the safe space of the group structure and utilizing the EIPARS structure, the leadership group appears to have had a positive impact on the students. Specifically, the WMS student leadership group highlighted the ability for students to analyze a pervasive school community issue collaboratively, to create action-oriented ideas to help solve the problem, and to begin the necessary work to create solutions. Interview results indicate that the students felt empowered by being directly involved in this student-led process, particularly when they were given the opportunity to have a discussion about bullying with teachers. This is consistent with the finding that teachers creating safe classroom environments was associated with kids being more likely to turn to these teachers for help and support when bullying occurs (Cortes & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2014). In this group, the students specifically sought out specific teachers—teachers they appeared to be more comfortable with—to share their ideas. These teachers appeared to take these ideas seriously and discussed possible actions to take based on these ideas. Similarly, this study replicates common findings from PAR approaches focused on empowering students to think through and begin to implement changes designed to enhance their experience (e.g., Cross et al., 2015). Students have unique insight into bullying prevention and intervention. However, in the school structure students often do not have much power to actualize their ideas (Cross et al., 2015). Talking with teachers afforded these students the opportunity to influence what happened in their school.

Thus, this group appeared to be a safe space for students to communicate respectfully with one another and with selected teachers about a social issue—bullying—that by its very nature can be very personal and overwhelmingly hard to understand. One could argue that this, particularly in combination with the successful piloting of a new group curriculum based on the Morrison et al.’s (2004) EIPARS format, was in and of itself a positive study outcome. Indeed, anecdotally, the students did appear to enjoy the group

from week to week and their interview feedback indicates that they felt personal growth and greater connection to other group members as a result of this experience.

However, although all the students indicated that they wanted to stay in this group as eighth graders and plans were underway to expand the reach of this effort the following school year via a new seventh grade group and utilizing the returning eighth graders as mentors, ultimately the *S* (sustain) of EIPARS was not achieved. By the time the group was completed, a new restructuring plan for the school—which would result in most of the group going to a new school and the school shifting from grades 7–8 to grades 4–8—was announced. The plan to use seventh graders in this project was purposeful as at the start of this group the school consisted of seventh and eighth graders. The plan was to use the original seventh graders as models when they became eighth graders while concurrently beginning a new seventh grade group. However, from a group of nine, only two students were to attend WMS the following school year. Shortly into the following school year, this was down to one returning student.

There were also changes in school staffing—a new principal, the retirement of a school social worker who was integral to the group’s launching, the reassignment of many of the school’s teachers, and the reassignment of what days of the week the school psychologist would be at WMS—that negatively affected plans. As such, a new seventh grade student group was attempted the following academic year, but this plan was ultimately scuttled due to logistical challenges and lack of administrative support. After a few false starts, it became evident that the group could not occur in a manner remotely similar to the previous year. This entire sequence of events interrupted the original group’s ability to grow their influence using the data gathered and the leadership and collaborative tools that the group members honed in the prior year. Indeed, the entire university/school bullying prevention partnership did not survive these changes. Thus, while this project began with many elements—lining up the support of key stakeholders, creating a shared vision, assembling a work team consisting of multiple key school stakeholders, gathering data from key stakeholders, implementing the plan—consistent with best practices in creating and sustaining systems-level change (Castillo & Curtis, 2014) and bullying prevention (Felix, Green, & Sharkey, 2014), in the end the project was abandoned due to school factors beyond anyone’s control.

What We Would Do Differently

While we feel proud of our efforts and even prouder of the students involved, certainly in hindsight there are many things that we would have done differently. Perhaps the most significant error was not keeping in regular contact with the school’s administrators. After working closely with these administrators on the broader bullying prevention efforts for a few years, we felt that the relationship was solid. And it was, at a personal level. However, what occurred is that the school administrator who was most engaged in this project began to shift her attention elsewhere. By the end of the student group, the university team began to function largely independently of the school-based team. We provided monthly updates and continued to support the gathering of school-wide data, but in a time where the school was in the process of being completely reorganized the university research team had less contact with the school administrators than we had before. This likely had an impact as to whether the group could continue and expand as planned as the school district as a whole was undergoing massive changes, but in retrospect we wish we had been more proactive in communicating with school administrators, school social workers, and school psychologists about this project.

The other major potential miss in this project was not linking this group to a broader school initiative, such as response to intervention/multitiered systems of support, positive behavior supports, and/or social-emotional learning. While none of these tiered processes were fully in place in WMS, we should have recognized sooner that without a linkage to the school’s strategic plan and core objectives, the group might never be an important priority. We at the university felt that since we were providing this support for free and the demands on the school personnel were quite minimal that we would be able to grow the group regardless of what else happened in the school. We also had hoped that the group would

be connected as a student compliment to the restorative justice initiative for teachers as originally planned. However, ultimately the training the teachers received on restorative justice was not sustained and by the time the university partnership ended it was our understanding that very few teachers were implementing restorative practices. Simply put, the educators were strong and the school principals were well meaning, but this program became a casualty of broader, disruptive system change as the school was reorganized and nearly all of the children and teachers who were involved in the original group were no longer at the school the following year.

Application to School Psychology Practice

School psychologists can and do play an important role in bullying prevention efforts. In this particular study, the project began when the school psychologist at the participating school was placed in charge of the school's bullying prevention efforts in her second year of practice. This led to a multiyear school/university collaboration encompassing multiple stakeholders that began with a comprehensive needs assessment (Shriberg et al., 2015) and culminated in this student leadership group. While the university support hopefully was helpful, the student leadership group described in this study could just as easily have been led by a practitioner. Indeed, as described, the EIPARS framework overlaps nicely with problem-solving and participatory processes promoted in school psychology (Song et al., 2014). Similarly, both the possibilities inherent in a student-centered effort as well as the logistical challenges in starting and sustaining such an effort may resonate with many practitioners' experiences. In this case, while there was enough administrative support to initiate this effort and whereas selected teachers readily agreed to be interviewed and to attend a group session, as the school experienced numerous transitions this effort was not sustained. The individual students reported leaving the experience more fully developed as leaders, more knowledgeable about bullying prevention, and more connected to one another, but the effort ended prematurely.

Was it worth it? As researchers, we think so as the student growth was evident, but this experience certainly highlights to the importance of planning for the long term—including potential changes—as much as possible when initiating new effort. This type of planning may be particularly important for student empowerment efforts taking place in a school that does not have a history of such efforts, as this type of work may not be foremost in school administrators' minds.

Limitations

While this project sought to obtain the perspectives of the nine students involved in this leadership group, these students were responding to a unique curriculum in a unique school context. As such, a limitation of any qualitative effort is that results may not be easily generalized. Similarly, these students did not represent a random sample of their school. Some were friends previously (the group included one set of twins) and they reported that as honors students they took many classes together. Thus, other groups might not cohere as quickly as this group did. Similarly, the results might be different if the group included a wider spectrum of student academic and behavioral performance.

Next Steps

Inasmuch as students themselves have a unique and important perspective on bullying prevention and intervention at their school, we encourage additional research centered both on student leadership development and on efforts to respond to student feedback. PAR is a logical and potentially quite powerful framework from which to center these kinds of efforts (Stringer, 2013). We thus encourage future PAR efforts not only with bullying prevention, but also with other topics related to student well-being. The EIPARS model described in this study can form the foundation of such research, as can other action research approaches, such as the participatory culture-specific intervention model most prominently associated with Bonnie Nastasi (e.g., Bell, Summerville, Nastasi, Paterson, & Earnshaw, 2015; Nastasi, Moore, & Varjas, 2004). As school psychologists committed to promoting the most positive

outcomes for children, we feel that we need to be attentive to and supportive of opportunities to empower students.

CONCLUSION

Bullying may never be fully eliminated, but it is hard to envision a fully successful prevention and intervention strategy that does not involve significant student participation and buy-in. As such, it is hoped that this project and the lessons learned from this work have made a positive contribution toward facilitating approaches that develop students as leaders and create spaces for schools to share power with their students towards promoting a healthier, safer learning environment for all.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To learn more about the EIPARS process, we encourage you to go to <https://app.box.com/s/etuasidldtml3xhvn85c>.

Additionally, there are a number of excellent resources related to bullying prevention. For example, the National Association of School Psychologists website contains a terrific area dedicated to bullying prevention, including links to numerous resources for families and educators (<http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/bullying-prevention>).

Finally, the federal government maintains an outstanding central resource on bullying prevention, covering topics such as cyberbullying, tips on preventing and responding to bullying, and coverage of each state's antibullying policies and laws (<https://www.stopbullying.gov>).

AUTHOR NOTE

The authors wish to acknowledge Samantha Loughlin, Leilani Castaneda, Joan Crusor, Rachael Koppel, Mary Ellen Lufrano, Cheryl Muench, and Caroline Stroud for their contributions to this project, as well as all of the participating students.

APPENDIX

Post Intervention Interview Questions

1. Please describe your experience in this group.
2. One group goal was to develop the leadership skills of group members. Do you feel that this goal was met? Please elaborate.
3. Another core group goal was for students to learn more about how bullying is defined. Do you feel that this goal was met? Please elaborate.
4. A final core group goal was for students to emerge feeling empowered to make a difference at Western Middle School in terms of bullying. Do you feel that this goal was met? Why or why not?
5. Please describe the parts of the group that you feel were *most* effective? Why do you feel this way?
6. Please describe the parts of the group that you feel were *least* effective? Why do you feel this way?
7. Should this group be run again next year? Why or why not? If yes, what advice do you have for things to keep, things to drop, and other ways to make the group better next year?
8. What advice do you have for adults at Western Middle School in terms of ways that they can reduce or eliminate bullying?
9. Additional comments.

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